Ischgl

Ischgl is unique: high, snow-sure slopes, a superb lift system, and a traditional-style Tyrolean village with extraordinary après-ski.

- Towny Tyrolean village, with lots of upmarket hotels
- High slopes with reliable snow
- Broad area of slopes linked to Switzerland, with some long runs
- Superb modern lift system
- Après-ski that could be described as lively and unhindered, or ...

Judging by the number of reader reports we receive, Ischgl and neighbouring Galtür are at last becoming more popular with UK skiers and boarders. About time, too – we’ve been droning on about Ischgl for years. Its lift system is particularly impressive, near the top of our fast lifts league table. Unless cost is an obstacle, or you insist on lots of woodland runs with unreliable snow, put it on your Austrian shortlist. And the après-ski? Well, it’s easy to avoid the pole dancing and lap dancing if that’s not your scene, so it shouldn’t cause anyone to stay away – except on principle. But it is part of a more general vulgarity about Ischgl that is less easy to pin down, and less easy to escape. You might prefer to stay in much quieter Galtür (a bus ride away), or Samnaun (linked to Ischgl’s ski area but a duty-free village in Switzerland).

THE RESORT

Ischgl is a compact village tucked away south of St Anton in the long, narrow Paznaun valley, on the Swiss border; the ski area is shared with Samnaun in Switzerland. A regional pass is available covering Galtür further up the valley and Kappl and See down the valley, all described at the end of this chapter. All are worth a visit and would make cheaper, quieter bases. There are frequent ski-buses to all of them. A car makes trips to St Anton viable.

VILLAGE CHARM ★★★★

More town than village

The buildings are predominantly traditional chalet style, with one or two modern exceptions, but this is no rustic backwater – the narrow streets give it a towny air, and the style is swanky and brash rather than tasteful. There’s a selection of lively bars and an excellent sports centre; shops are mainly confined to winter sports. The narrow main street plus a couple of side streets are mostly traffic-free – the valley road up to Galtür bypasses the village.

CONVENIENCE ★★★★

Be aware of the bypass

The best location, overall, is on or near the main pedestrian street. At the western end is the main gondola to the mid-mountain focus of Idalp. On the eastern fringe of the village, there is a low hill but reachable via an underground moving walkway, is another gondola to Idalp, and a third to Pardatschgrat, higher up. Beware of accommodation across the bypass road, a long way from the lifts.

SCENERY ★★★★

Good at the top

The wooded flanks of the valley rise steeply from the village, which gets almost no sun in January. But above the treeline, the Silvretta range is revealed in all its glory.

THE MOUNTAINS

Ischgl is a fair-sized, relatively high, snow-sure area. Practically all the slopes are above the treeline, the main exception being the steep lower slopes above the village and a couple of short runs low in the Fimbatal. The piste map is good. But signposting can be ‘a bit confusing’ says a recent reporter and a 2009 visitor found the edge marking ‘shocking and dangerous – my wife went over the edge in poor visibility and had a nasty fall’. Reporters generally find grooming ‘excellent’.

EXTENT OF THE SLOPES ★★★★★

Extensive cross-border cruising

The sunny Idalp plateau, reached by the 24-person Silvrettabahn and eight-seat Fimbabahn, is the hub of the slopes. It can be very crowded, especially at ski school meeting time, lunchtime and the end of the day. Pardatschgrat, reached by the third gondola, is about 300m/980ft higher, and offers testing runs of 1260m/4130ft vertical to the village. From Idalp, lifts radiate to a wide variety of mainly north-west- and west-facing runs including over the border in Switzerland. The red runs back down to Ischgl provoke regular complaints. Neither is easy, conditions can be tricky, and beer-lubricated crowds don’t help. Quite a few people ride the gondolas down; you can leave your skis and boots in lockers at Idalp if you wish. The wide, quiet piste down the pretty Velilltal is much more pleasant, but doesn’t entirely avoid the steep bottom part of run 1A to the Pardatschgratbahn, which should probably be a black. A short piste brings you from Idalp to the lifts serving the Höllenkarschůlz, leading up to the area’s south-western extremity and high point at Palinkopf. Runs of 900m/2950ft vertical from here lead down to the Fimbatal. On the Swiss side, the hub of activity is Alp Trida, surrounded by south- and east-facing runs with great views. From here a scenic red run goes down to Compatsch, where a short walk takes you to buses to Ravaish – for the cable car back – and Samnaun. From Palinkopf there is a long, beautiful red run down an unspoiled valley to Samnaun-Dorf – not difficult, but excessively sunny in parts and prone to closure by avalanche risk. There is a long flat stretch at the end.

FAST LIFTS ★★★★★

One of the best

For 2009/10 snowmaking is again being increased, and several hotels and restaurants are being renovated and modernised. There are plans to replace the Pardatschgrat gondola – but not until 2010/11. 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and king-size lines. New rails and boxes were added last season, as well as several good intermediate and entry-level kickers. The big pro line consists of several 15-17m/50-56ft kickers and three corner jumps in a row. Fluidity was vastly improved last season, allowing you to hit several obstacles in a row. The World Rookie fest finals are held every January – where rails and wall rides get a makeover by local and national street artists.

SNOW RELIABILITY ★★★★★
Very good
All the slopes, except the runs back to the resort, are above 1800m/5,910ft, and many of those on the Ischgl side are north-west-facing. So snow conditions are generally reliable; we’ve always had good snow here, and we are not alone. There is snowmaking on a good proportion of the slopes, including the descents to Ischgl and Samnaun – due to be increased again this year. Piste grooming is good.

FOR EXPERTS ★★★★★
Not much on-piste challenge
Ischgl can’t compare with St Anton for exciting slopes, and some of the runs marked black on the piste map would be red elsewhere. But by general Tirolean standards Ischgl serves experts quite well. None of the black runs is particularly steep, but all are genuine blacks and in combination with testing reds offer excellent, challenging descents. Head first for Palinkopf and Pardatschgrat – piste 4 is a favourite – but don’t neglect Greitspitz. The wooded lower slopes of the Fimbatal are delightful in a storm. There are off-piste opportunities around the pistes all over the place; there is plenty of serious off-piste to be found with a guide; and powder doesn’t get tracked out quickly. There are also ski routes. Ski route 39 from Palinkopf is recommended to leave you ‘suitably exhausted’ after a testing 1000m/3,280ft descent.

FOR INTERMEDIATES ★★★★
Something for everyone
Most of the slopes are wide, forgiving and ideal for intermediates. At the tough end of the spectrum our favourite runs are those from Palinkopf down to Gampernalp at the edge of the ski area, with great views of virgin slopes. There are also interesting and challenging black runs down the Höllspitz chair, and on Greenspitz. The reds from Pardatschgrat and Veilischarte down the beautiful Veilittal and the red from Greitspitz into Switzerland are great for quiet, high-speed cruising.

For easier motorway cruising, there is lots of choice, including those down to and around Alp Trida on the Swiss side – but these can get crowded. Timid intermediates should avoid the steep runs back to town.

FOR BEGINNERS ★★★
Up the mountain
Beginners must buy a full lift pass and go up the mountain to Idalp, where there are good, sunny, snow-sure nursery slopes served by drags and a fast chair. The blue runs on the east side of the bowl offer pleasant progression for fast learners. Over at Alp Trida there are further easy expanses – you can return by lift.
Ischgl has long been a popular spot for snowboarders, with its long, wide, well-groomed slopes served by snowboard-friendly gondolas and high-speed chairlifts. Although the off-piste terrain is less steep than in some other resorts, its above-the-treeline, easily accessible nature and good snow record makes for great riding for most ability levels. Ischgl is home to one of Austria's best terrain parks and Silvretta Sports and Intersport Mathyo are recommended snowboard shops.

FOR CROSS-COUNTRY ★★★★★

Plenty in the valley

There are 24km/15 miles of track in the valley between Ischgl, Galtür and Wirl. This tends to be shady, especially in early season, and is away from the main slopes, which makes meeting downhills for lunch inconvenient.

MOUNTAIN RESTAURANTS ★★★★★

New and improved

Mountain restaurants have tended to improve in quality, but with inadequate capacity. But things have improved recently, with new places opening on both sides of the border. Editors’ choice The Marmotte (+41 81 459 5200) at Alp Trida on the Swiss side wins no prizes for interior design but serves deliciously good food in calm and comfortable surroundings. On the Austrian side, in the past we’ve had fabulous spicy prawns and ox fillet at the glass-sided Pardatschgrat complex (6060h0) at the top of Pardatschgrat.

Worth knowing about At Idalp the Alpenhaus has a choice of table- or self-service, and gets top marks from a reporter for its ‘stunning’ interior design, with a mention too for the barbecued steak. The Pznauzer Thaya, above Bodenalp, has table- and self-service sections, and offers a very good service. Some reporters prefer the quieter Bodenalp, down in Fimbatal: ‘service with a smile’ and ‘huge portions’. From Gampenpael you can be towed up 5km/3 miles by snowmobile to the remote Heidelberger hütte – the way back is quite hard work, though.

On the Swiss side the newish Salaas is a spacious, sunny, glass-sided place just above Alp Trida Eck, with self-service and ‘limited’ table service. We’ve had mixed reviews but a 2009 visitor raved about the ‘stunning views’. The wooden Alp Billa is good value and a consistent favourite – ‘fabulous rösti, delicious beef dishes’. Skihaus Alp Trida and the Panorama Sattel have also been recommended, not least for the views.

SCHOOLS AND GUIDES ★★★★★

Best for late risers

The school meets up at Idalp and starts at 10am. A 2009 visitor found his lesson ‘good’ with his instructor speaking ‘sufficient English’ and the class smaller than the 10-12 that he noticed many others contained. The school also organises off-piste tours.

FOR FAMILIES ★★★★★

High-altitude options

The childcare (+526) are all up at Idalp. Small kids might be better off in Galtür or Kappl – see descriptions at the end of this chapter.

STAYING THERE

Hotels

There is a good selection from luxurious and pricey to simple B&Bs.

*****Trotuna Royal (600) One of Austria’s most luxurious hotels, with prices to match. A celebrity chef runs the kitchen. Sumptuous spa facilities.


*****Elisabeth (5411) Right by the Pardatschgrat gondola, with lively après-ski. Pool, sauna and steam.

*****Solaria (5205) Near the Madlein and just as luxurious, with a ‘friendly family atmosphere’ and ‘helpful staff’.

*****Briolte (5646) Central, but quiet location. Pool. Highly recommended.

*****Piz Tasna (5277) Up hill behind church: ‘Quiet, friendly, lovely views.’

*****Goldener Adler (5277) Central, smart, modern hotel, with ‘outstanding food’. Sauna and whirlpool.


*****Jägerhof (5266) ‘Jewel of a hotel.’ Friendly, good food, large rooms. Sauna, steam and whirlpool.

*****Post (5232) ‘Excellent central position; very nice staff’, says a 2008 visitor. Wellness centre.

*****Krippe (5206) Probably the best B&B in town. ‘ Huge rooms, nice views, near the lifts.’ Sauna and steam.

UK PACKAGES

Alpine Answers, Crystal, Crystal Finest, First Choice, Independent Ski Links, Inghams, Interhome, Kuoni, Made to Measure, Momentum, Simply Alpine, Ski Expectations, Ski Independence, Ski Solutions, Skiing Austria, Skitracker, Snow Finders, STC, Gallier Crystal, Inghams, Ingolms, Nelson, Ski Information, Skiing Austria, Kappl Skiing Austria See Skiing Austria

ACTIVITIES

Indoor Silvretta Centre (bowling, billiards, swimming pool, tennis, sauna, solarium, massage, museums, concerts)

Outdoor Ice rink, curling, sleigh rides, hiking tours, 7km/4 miles floodlit toboggan run

APRES-SKI ★★★★★

Very lively

Ischgl is one of the liveliest resorts in Austria’s Alps, from early afternoon on. Lots of people are still in ski boots late in the evening. Mountain restaurants such as Pznauzer Thaya slide into après mode directly after lunch. When you manage to get back to the village, the obvious spots of call are the Trofana Alm near the Silvrettabahn or the Schatzi bar of the hotel Elisabeth by the Pardatschgratbahn – with scantly clad dancing girls. Nik’s Stadl across the road is the place for a Tirolean knees-up, with DJs. The Kitzloch ‘rocks’, with dancing on the tables in ski boots. The Kusshait under the Sporthotel Silvretta and Feuer & Eis over the road are packed all evening. The bar at the hotel Sonne, the Höllboden and the Golden Eagle are ‘good for live bands’. The Allegra lives up after dinner. There’s lap dancing at the huge Trofana Arena and the Coyote Ugly at hotel Madlein. The Pacha nightclub (also in Ibiza and London) is a bit ‘tacky’, says a visitor.

GETTING THERE

Air Innsbruck 95km/60 miles (1h16m), Zürich 240km/150 miles (3hr30); Munich 300km/185 miles (4hr)

Rail Landeck (30km/19 miles); frequent buses from station

****Dorfischmiede (5769) Small, central B&B with ‘friendly service’.

****Lamitana (6005) Near the Silvrettabahn. ‘Very good buffet breakfast; spacious, modern rooms.’ Wellness area.

****Alpenlühl (5394) Convenient, recently refurbished and good value. Recommended by a recent visitor.

Apartments Some attractive apartments are available. Recommendations include the Golfaus by the Pardatschgrat gondola and the apartments in the hotel Silvretta (with use of its spa).

EATING OUT ★★★★★

Plenty of choice

Most of our reporters eat in their hotels. For lighter meals try the Nona, the Schatzi or the Trofana Alm (‘good ribs’), which is as much a bar as a restaurant, and for fast food the Kitzloch, with its galleries over the dance floor. The Allegra and Salz & Pfeffer ‘pasta and pizza’ have been recommended. The Grillalm and Salnerhof are popular, ‘traditional Austrian fare, huge portions’. A reporter pronounces the Nudelhimmel (hotel Solaria) his favourite – local dishes at reasonable prices. The Nevada has also been recommended: ‘Excellent venison and duck.’

OFF THE SLOPES ★★★★★

No sun but a nice pool

The village gets little sun in the middle of winter, and the resort is best suited to those keen to hit the slopes. But there’s no shortage of off-slope activities. There are lots of well-marked and maintained walking paths including many at altitude (the tourist office claims an astonishing 1140km/700 miles of walks in the whole Paznaun valley), a 7km/4 mile floodlit toboggan run and a splendid sports centre. And you can browse upmarket shops, visit the children’s centres and the vegetable and bogner. It’s easy to get around the valley by bus and the Smuggler’s Pass for pedestrians enables them to use specially selected lifts.

Saunamann 18.40pm/6.40pm

Small, quiet, duty-free Saunamann is in a corner of Switzerland more easily reached from Austria. It is virtually Brit-free. There are four small components, roughly 1km/0.5 mile apart: Saunamann-Dorf, prettily set at the head of the valley is the main focus, with some swanky hotels and duty-free shops; Ravisach, where the cable car goes up; tiny Plan; and the hamlets of Laret and Compatsch, at the end of the main run down from the slopes. We’ve stayed happily on the edge of Dorf in the Waldpark B&B (868130), and have eaten well at the Pasta in the hotel Montana (868900). Reporters recommend the 4-star hotel Post (8691200) (‘good food but pricey’), 4-star Muller (868130) (‘very good spa and complimentary ski bus’), the Alpina (‘exceptional value’, traditional Swiss food, where the
locals eat’) and Des Alpes (‘modern food and affordable’). There’s a smart AlpenQuell spa-pool-fitness centre.

The Schmuggler Alm at the bottom of the long run from Palinkof is a popular après-ski spot and does ‘a good lunch’. A reporter also recommends a ‘delicious amaretto hot chocolate’ at the Almraus (hotel Cresta), at Compatsch.

**Kappl 1260m/4,130ft**

Kappl, a 15-minute bus ride down the valley from Ischgl, is worth a visit – we’ve had a great half-day there. Both the village and the slopes are family-oriented, and delightfully quiet compared with Ischgl. The village, with a couple of dozen hotels and guesthouses, sits on a shelf 100m/330ft above the valley floor. The Sunny Mountain area at the top of the access gondola has a big kindergarten and outside play area. There’s a long toboggan run from here back to the village (floodlit twice a week).

There are 40km/25 miles of sunny, largely south-facing pistes going up to 2640m/8,660ft. The slopes – served by an access gondola from the roadside and fast quads above it – offer plenty of variety, with several tough reds, including the Lattenabfahrt down a deserted valley from the top – 8km/5 miles long, 985m/3,230ft vertical, more if you go on to the valley floor. Most of the slopes are open, but the run down the gondola offers some shelter for bad-weather days. Snowguns cover all but the highest slopes.

**See 1050m/3,440ft**

See, a 10-minute bus ride further down the valley from Kappl, has 33km/21 miles of predominantly easy, largely north-facing slopes. It is worth a visit from Ischgl to get away from the crowds, if you don’t mind the limited extent of the slopes.

We found great powder here on our recent April visit – excellent for making your first turns off-piste. There’s a good nursery slope at the top of the access gondola, and easy runs to progress to. Piste 10 is a beautiful red run round the back of the mountain, away from all lifts, with spectacular views – a pleasant ski to start with and then a road you cruise along admiring the views. Bambini World offers childcare. There’s a popular toboggan run.

See is worth considering as a base for families – it’s quieter and cheaper than Ischgl; but the village is not especially attractive and is rather spoiled by the main road through it. Accommodation is largely in 3-star roadside hotels and guest houses.

**Galtür 1585m/5,200ft**

Galtür is a charming, peaceful, traditional village clustered around a pretty little church, amid impressive mountain scenery at the head of the valley (and so unspoiled by through-traffic). Rebuilt and fortified after the devastating avalanche of 1999, the village is now home to the impressive Alpinarium, an avalanche-protection structure with an exhibition centre – ‘worth a visit’, says a reporter, despite the fact that it’s all in German.

Sunnier, cheaper and much quieter than Ischgl, Galtür is a good base for families and mixed-ability groups – and the free buses to Ischgl are regular and quick, but they stop at around 6pm, ‘so evening activities required a 20 euro taxi’ says a 2009 visitor. There are good hotels, including the 4-star Almhof (8253), Flüchthorn (8202), Ballunspitze (8214) and 3-star Alpenrose (8201).

Galtür’s own slopes rise to 2295m/7,530ft above a lift base at Wirl, a short bus ride from the village. The ski area has been re-branded Silvapark, with six ‘sectors’ (including one for kids with cartoon characters) to help guests make the most of the mountain. The slopes are not very challenging and can be bleak in poor weather; but the black runs are ideal for intermediates and there are fine nursery slopes. The area on the far right of the piste map, served by a slow double chair and a T-bar, has some good off-piste in a bowl and among well-spaced trees. There’s a terrain park beside the Zeinisliift drag. The school is ‘excellent and well organised’ and offers small classes. Kinderland has its own tow, carousel and moving carpet. Galtür has 74km/46 miles of cross-country loops, some quite testing. The cosy, wooden Wiberhimml mountain hut has waitresses in traditional costume.

Off-slope facilities are limited, but there’s a sports centre with pool, tennis and squash. Night skiing and sledging are available on Wednesdays.